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Senator fears CIA's Nicaragua goal is 'violent overthrow'

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WASHINGTON — Sen. Daniel Moynihan, vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, says he has concluded that the Reagan administration might be seeking the "violent overthrow" of Nicaragua's Sandinista government through a CIA covert operation.

Under existing agreements between the Central Intelligence Agency and the Senate and House oversight intelligence units, the CIA support for Nicaraguan insurgents fighting the Sandinistas is intended to pressure Nicaraguan leaders to stop aiding the leftist guerrillas in El Salvador, not to bring down the Nicaraguan government.

But in a Senate floor speech Thursday night that was generally overlooked during debate over the administration's request for emergency military aid for El Salvador and the CIA-backed Nicaraguan rebels, Moynihan, D.-N.Y., wondered whether the president might have misled Congress.

Moynihan said the administration might be going beyond its stated goals in response to pressure from the CIA-supported insurgents, who repeatedly have said they are fighting to topple the Sandinistas.

Moynihan's seven-page speech marked a major departure for the senator from his usually cautious stand on the controversial CIA Nicaragua covert program.

Moynihan's speech reopens the debate in Congress over whether the CIA is violating congressional constraints on the Nicaragua activity, a question that has dominated the issue since the covert operation began in 1981.

Sen. Daniel Moynihan said the administration might be going beyond its stated goals.



The source of Moynihan's concern was an interview with Reagan published Thursday by The New York Times in which the president discussed the CIA's support for the Nicaraguan counterrevolutionaries, or contras.

Reagan, in the interview, said: "I see no dichotomy in our supporting the government, the democratic government of El Salvador and the contras here — and we made it plain to Nicaragua — made it very plain that this would stop when they keep their promise and restore the democratic rule and have elections."

In analyzing Reagan's remarks, Moynihan said that if the Nicaraguan government "cannot be changed by elections, how is it to be changed save by violent overthrow." He added that "that is a necessary if unintended conclusion to be drawn from the president's statement yesterday."

Moynihan recalled that Congress has not authorized a covert operation to "bring about any such outcome [the overthrow of

the Sandinistas]," because "to do so would undermine the very legal foundation on which we base the program we have authorized."

Thus, Moynihan asked: "Has the president deceived us? I doubt this, it is not his nature, nor that of his associates."

What must have happened, Moynihan said, is that the president "has misstated his own policy" or that the CIA has "adopted the agenda" of the contras, "even if that agenda increasingly diverges from the goals which we, the United States, set out to accomplish."

He said those goals, as authorized Sept. 20 by the Senate Intelligence Committee, were to continue support for the contras to interdict the Nicaraguan arms flow to El Salvador and force the Sandinistas to "stop their subversion in neighboring countries."